

Message Text

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ACTION ARA-14

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C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 02 PANAMA 05143

E.O. 11652: GDS
TAGS: PGOV, PINT, PN
SUBJECT: NATIONAL ASSEMBLY ELECTIONS

REF: A. PANAMA 2128, B. PANAMA 4897

SUMMARY: ELECTION DAY FOR PANAMA'S 505 COMMUNITY REPRESENTATIVES DRAWS NEAR. THESE REPRESENTATIVES ARE ABOVE ALL LOCAL OFFICIALS. COLLECTIVELY THEY MAKE UP THE NATIONAL ASSEMBLY, WHICH MEETS A FEW WEEKS EACH YEAR BUT HAS FEW LEGISLATIVE FUNCTIONS. IT DOES ELECT THE PRESIDENT, BUT WILL UNDOUBTEDLY FOLLOW TORRIJOS' LEAD ON THAT QUESTION. PARTICIPATION APPEARS TO BE WIDESPREAD AND ENTHUSIASTIC, BUT THE CAMPAIGN -- ISSUE-LESS AT BEST -- APPEARS TO BE ECLIPSED BY TORRIJOS' RECENT PRONOUNCEMENTS ON FUTURE POLITICAL REFORM. THE ACTUAL VOTE ON AUGUST 6, WHICH WILL BE OBSERVED BY A HIGH-LEVEL OAS TEAM, IS EXPECTED TO BE HONEST, THOUGH THE GOVERNMENT IS USING ITS POWER TO BACK FAVORED CANDIDATES. END SUMMARY.

1. PANAMA IS GOING THROUGH THE FINAL STAGES OF AN ELECTORAL PROCESS WHICH WILL REACH ITS CLIMAX AUGUST 6 WITH THE ELECTION OF 505 "COMMUNITY REPRESENTATIVES". THESE REPRESENTATIVES -- ALTHOUGH THEY SIT AS A
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"NATIONAL ASSEMBLY" A FEW WEEKS EACH YEAR -- HAVE LITTLE NATIONAL POWER, LEGISLATIVE OR OTHERWISE. THEY ELECT THE PRESIDENT AND (BY ACTION OF TWO CONSECUTIVE ASSEMBLIES) MAY AMEND THE CONSTITUTION; BUT THEY ARE PRIMARILY LOCAL OFFICIALS. AND BECAUSE THEY ARE LOCAL OFFICIALS WHOSE EFFECTIVENESS DEPENDS ON THEIR COOPERATIVENESS WITH THE ALL-POWERFUL CENTRAL GOVERNMENT, MOST OF THEM CAN BE

COUNTED ON TO FOLLOW THE GUIDANCE OF THE GOVERNMENT IN ALL PARTICULARS.

2. WITH THE COMPLETION OF THE NOMINATING STAGE IN APRIL, A FINAL LIST OF CANDIDATES WAS PUBLISHED ON MAY 25, AND THE FINAL ELECTORAL REGISTER OF QUALIFIED VOTERS WILL BE PUBLISHED JULY 25. ACCORDING TO THE ELECTORAL TRIBUNAL, THE TOTAL NUMBER OF QUALIFIED CANDIDATES IS 2,404 (THE ELECTORAL LAW PROVIDES FOR A MAXIMUM OF FIVE CANDIDATES IN EACH OF THE 505 COMMUNITIES). OUT OF AN ELECTORAL POPULATION OF APPROXIMATELY 800,000, THOSE WHO REGISTERED THEIR SUPPORT FOR A "PRE-CANDIDATE" IN THE NOMINATING PROCESS NUMBERED 402,907, ROUGHLY HALF OF THE VOTING POPULATION (787,251, AS OF THE OCTOBER 1977 PLEBISCITE ON THE PANAMA CANAL TREATIES). THESE CANDIDATES ARE CAMPAIGNING HARD, WITH BANNERS AND POSTERS AND CAR CARAVANS IN SUPPORT OF ONE HOPEFUL OR ANOTHER MUCH IN EVIDENCE.

3. THE GOVERNMENT IS FLAUNTING THESE IMPRESSIVE FIGURES AS EVIDENCE OF THE PEOPLE'S FAITH IN TORRIJOS' SYSTEM OF "PODER POPULAR" (POWER OF THE PEOPLE). THERE ARE MANY TRUE BELIEVERS IN TORRIJOS' SYSTEM, OF COURSE, SO THAT FAITH IS IN FACT PART OF THE REASON FOR SUCH A HIGH RATE OF PARTICIPATION IN THE ELECTIONS. BUT OTHER FACTORS FIGURE IN. AS NOTED ABOVE, THE COMMUNITY REPRESENTATIVES ARE IMPORTANT LOCAL OFFICIALS. ALSO, PANAMANIAN SIMPLY CONFIDENTIAL

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ENJOY POLITICKING, AND THEY HAVE NOT HAD THE CHANCE TO ENGAGE IN IT FOR SIX YEARS. ON THE OTHER HAND, SOME SAY -- PROBABLY CORRECTLY -- THAT THE GOVERNMENT ITSELF HAS HAD A HAND IN IT ALL AND THAT GOVERNMENT EMPLOYEES WERE UNDER PRESSURE TO SIGN UP IN SUPPORT OF A CANDIDATE.

4. THREE MONTHS AGO, EARLY IN THE ELECTORAL PROCESS, IT WAS REPORTED THAT REAL "ISSUES", AS SUCH, HAD NOT YET EMERGED AND THAT, AT LEAST AT THE NOMINATING STAGE, THE CAMPAIGN WAS MORE OF A POPULARITY CONTEST THAN ANYTHING ELSE. FOR THE MOST PART, THE SAME CAN STILL BE SAID, AS EMBOFF DISCUSSIONS WITH SEVERAL CANDIDATES HAVE REVEALED. ONE CANDIDATE REMARKED THAT SHE HAD COMMISSIONED AN OPINION POLL OF HER CONSTITUENTS. IN ANSWER TO ONE QUESTION, THE RESPONDENTS RANKED THE ISSUES OF GREATEST CONCERN TO THEM AS 1) PANAMA'S ECONOMIC SITUATION, 2) THE CRIME RATE, AND 3) COMMUNISTS IN GOVERNMENT. BUT SUCH BROAD, BASIC CONCERNS AS THESE APPARENTLY HAVE NOT BEEN DEVELOPED AS ISSUES DIFFERENTIATING CANDIDATES. THE POLITICAL PARTIES, WHICH MIGHT GIVE SUBSTANCE TO THE CAMPAIGN, ARE SITTING IT OUT. THEY CLAIM THE ELECTION IS MEANINGLESS, SINCE THE NATIONAL ASSEMBLY HAS SO FEW

POWERS.

5. ISSUES, SUCH AS THEY ARE, CENTER AROUND WHETHER AN INCUMBENT RUNNING FOR RE-ELECTION HAS SERVED HIS COMMUNITY WELL, WHICH CANDIDATE WOULD BE MORE RESPONSIVE TO THE COMMUNITY'S NEEDS, WHICH IS MORE HONEST OR HARD-WORKING, AND SO ON. IN A SYSTEM IN WHICH THE COMMUNITY REPRESENTATIVES HAVE THEIR PRIMARY IMPACT AT THE LOCAL LEVEL AND HAVE SO LITTLE AUTHORITY AT THE NATIONAL LEVEL, THIS IS NO SURPRISE AND IS EVEN APPROPRIATE. AT THE SAME TIME, THERE IS A NATIONAL DEBATE OF SORTS GOING ON IN

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PANAMA RIGHT NOW, DUE TO ALL OF TORRIJOS' RECENT TALK OF POLITICAL REFORM (REF B) AND THE REACTIONS HIS STATEMENTS HAVE ELICITED. BUT THE CANDIDATES ARE NOT PARTICIPATING IN THE DIALOG. AMONG TORRIJOS' IDEAS FOR POLITICAL CHANGE IS TO REFORM THE NATIONAL ASSEMBLY OF COMMUNITY REPRESENTATIVES ITSELF, BASICALLY BY GIVING IT GREATER LEGISLATIVE RESPONSIBILITY AND THUS A GREATER ROLE IN THE DECISION-MAKING PROCESS AT THE NATIONAL LEVEL. ON THE OTHER HAND, ANOTHER PROPOSED REFORM WOULD TAKE ELECTION OF THE PRESIDENT AWAY FROM THE ASSEMBLY AND GIVE IT TO THE PEOPLE. IN ANY EVENT, THE DEBATE OF POSSIBLE REFORMS IS BYPASSING THE ELECTIONS ALTOGETHER AND, IN FACT, SEEMS TO HAVE ECLIPSED THEM.

6. FOR THE BIG DAY ON AUGUST 6, THE GOVERNMENT HAS INVITED THE OAS TO SEND OBSERVERS AND A PRESTIGIOUS THREE-MAN TEAM HAS BEEN NAMED TO BE PRESENT IN A PRIVATE CAPACITY. WE EXPECT THAT THE VOTING PROCESS, LIKE THE PLEBISCITE LAST YEAR, WILL BE BASICALLY HONEST. BUT

THERE ARE INDICATIONS THAT IRREGULARITIES HAVE OCCURRED
THROUGHOUT THE CAMPAIGN PROCESS -- EITHER SPONSORED OR
TOLERATED BY THE GOVERNMENT -- WHICH COULD MAKE AN
"HONEST VOTE" A LITTLE LESS THAN HONEST:
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-- BEGINNING WITH THE NOMINATING STAGE, THERE WERE
ACCUSATIONS THAT CANDIDATES WERE SIGNING UP SUPPORTERS
ILLEGALLY, ACCUSATIONS WHICH WERE NOT INVESTIGATED BY
THE ELECTORAL AUTHORITIES.

-- SOME CANDIDATES ALLEGE THAT INCUMBENTS ARE PROMOTING
THEIR RE-ELECTION BY HANDING OUT PUBLIC FUNDS OR
DISPENSING PUBLIC SERVICES TO THEIR SUPPORTERS.

-- THE GOVERNMENT IS OPENLY BACKING FAVORED CANDIDATES,
AND, REPORTEDLY, THE CABINET MINISTERS ARE UNDER PRESSURE
TO TURN OUT "GOOD RESULTS" IN DESIGNATED AREAS.

7. HOWEVER THE ELECTIONS TURN OUT, THE MORE IMPORTANT
DEVELOPMENT WILL BE THE INSTITUTION OF REFORMS WHICH
TORRIJOS HAS BEEN SUGGESTING. ACCORDING TO THE SCENARIO
TORRIJOS SEEMS TO HAVE IN MIND, THE NEW COMMUNITY
REPRESENTATIVES ELECTED AUGUST 6, TOGETHER WITH THE
CURRENT NATIONAL ASSEMBLY, WILL BE "CONSULTED" IN SOME
MANNER AND CONSTITUTIONAL REFORMS WORKED OUT. THE MAJOR
REFORMS WILL ENTAIL A NEW FORMULA FOR NATIONAL ASSEMBLY
PARTICIPATION IN THE LEGISLATIVE PROCESS AND, POSSIBLY,
A RENEWAL OF TORRIJOS' TERM AS CHIEF OF GOVERNMENT.
IN ADDITION, TORRIJOS HAS ALSO SPOKEN OF A "HIGH-LEVEL
COMMISSION" TO STUDY AND MAKE RECOMMENDATIONS ON OTHER
CHANGES IN THE POLITICAL STRUCTURE, INCLUDING THE
LEGALIZATION OF POLITICAL PARTIES (REF B). WHAT THE
RELATIONSHIP BETWEEN THE NATIONAL ASSEMBLY AND THE "HIGH-
LEVEL COMMISSION" WILL BE HAS NOT BEEN MADE CLEAR, BUT
THE COMMISSION'S WORK WILL NOT GET UNDERWAY IN TIME TO
AFFECT THE ADMINISTRATION WHICH TAKES OFFICE IN OCTOBER.
AND THE TERM OF THAT ADMINISTRATION, HEADED BY TORRIJOS
-- WHETHER AS PRESIDENT, IN A NEW TERM AS CHIEF OF
GOVERNMENT, OR OTHERWISE -- IS NOT SCHEDULED TO END
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